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## NOTES ON ALLITERATION IN SPENSER

In his Introduction to the poetical works of Spenser, Mr. E. De Selincourt says, "Like Milton, he (Spenser) knew the power of alliteration upon *w* to give the sense of vastness and desolation."<sup>1</sup> In support of this statement, the following lines from the *Faerie Queene* are quoted and referred to:

In all his wayes through this wide worldes waue (I, ix, 34.8)  
 For still he traueild through wide wastful ground (II, vii, 2.8)  
 Who trauels by the wearie wandring way (I, ix, 39.1)

The above implication, however, that in *w* alliteration was contained the sense of vastness and desolation seemed a little too sweeping. Tests were therefore made, and some interesting results have been obtained.

The First Book of the *Faerie Queene* contains 225 cases of alliteration upon *w* in stressed syllables. In arriving at this figure, *wr* alliteration was not included, for that sound is practically identical with *r*.<sup>2</sup> The *wh* alliteration also was not considered to be a pure *w* sound.

Out of these 225 instances of true *w* alliteration, there are but thirty examples in which we may possibly find even a remote suggestion of "vastness and desolation." This means that only about 13% conform to the principle proposed by our critic. There remain an overwhelming majority, 87%, which must be classed as exceptions to the rule of Mr. De Selincourt.

Moreover, the most casual investigation of the thirty cases<sup>3</sup> of *w* alliteration which do, in some way, suggest this idea, will show clearly that it is not the alliteration but the meaning of the word or words in context which gives this sense. This may be readily shown by considering the lines which Mr. De Selincourt himself uses. Let us look at them again:

In all his wayes through this wide worldes waue  
 For still he traueild through wide wastful ground  
 Who trauels by the wearie wandring way

<sup>1</sup> *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, Oxford ed., edited by J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt, p. lxxv.

<sup>2</sup> See Henry Sweet, "*A History of English Sounds*," p. 268.

<sup>3</sup> These thirty instances occur: Book I: i, 9.3; i, 32.1; i, 39.2; i, 53.2; ii, 1.5; ii, 7.9; ii, 22.8; ii, 24.8; ii, 28.2; ii, 42.9; iii, 3.4; iii, 3.8; iii, 21.4; iii, 31.2; iv, 46.8; v, 11.2; v, 19.8; v, 33.2; v, 44.9; vi, 34.3; vii, 39.9; viii, 49.9; ix, 9.9; ix, 33.9; ix, 39.1; x, 34.1; x, 34.8; xi, 21.2; xi, 31.6; xii, 34.3.

It is clear that in the words *wayes*, *wide*, *worldes*, *wave*, *wastful*, *wearie* and *wandring*, it is the meaning of the word and not the sound of the letter *w* that in each case gives any degree of the sense of vastness and desolation. The *w* has nothing to do with this feeling. Some of these words suggest this sense, and more so when in proper context. If it were, however, the letter *w* which is responsible for this meaning, then we should have a host of words, all beginning with *w*, whose inner, or "sound-meaning" would convey a particular sense in addition to their established meanings. In fact, every word with initial *w* would have a sense of vastness and desolation attached to it. It would not be difficult to show that this is far from true.

The case will perhaps be made more plain by considering the *w* alliterations in the 87% of instances, in which there is no sense of vastness or desolation whatever. Let us glance at a few random examples:

|   |                 |
|---|-----------------|
| What man so wise, what earthly wit so ware    | (I, vii, 1.1)   |
| But welcome now my Lord, in wele or woe       | (I, viii, 43.1) |
| And with his winged heeles did tread the wind | (I, ix, 21.8)   |
| Then with his wauing wings displayed wide     | (I, xi, 18.1)   |

We see in these instances true *w* alliteration, but all sense of vastness and desolation is wanting. Illustrations of the lack of this sense in *w* alliteration could be given to the point of weariness. In Spenser, or in any other poet, *w* alliteration did not suggest this specific idea. Wherever it occurs, it results from the content of the word alone.

And finally, another point must be mentioned with regard to this secondary meaning or sense in alliteration. It is impossible to reduce this point to terms of percentages; hence that vague but saving grace, common sense, must be employed. It would be difficult, even in so great a poet as Spenser, to choose words with *w* alliteration, for example, which would yield a "sound-meaning" or sense in addition to the requirements of poetic diction, meter and general meaning.

This would point to a fault as common in literary criticism as in the varied affairs of life—jumping at conclusions. Undoubtedly there was much in the power of Spenser's verse which, when the poet willed, would stir the reader to sense of "vastness and desolation," or whatever else was desired, but the error above pointed out lay in the fact that our critic sought to account for this sense in the *sound* of a few words in the passage.

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